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The Authority of Feeling in Mid-Twentieth-Century English Conservatism

Emily Robinson*

In April 1951, James F. Dunning, a veteran, living ‘in a flat in a terrace of old-fashioned houses’ in Brighton, wrote to the *Kemp Town Post*, the newspaper of his local Conservative Association. He described the ‘pious hope’ – though ‘not expectation’ – he and his wife, Edith, had shared of resuming at least part of their pre-war existence by settling in Brighton, before noting the ‘instinctive sense of doom’ which had overcome them ‘ever since an ill-informed, easily bamboozled electorate ungratefully rejected the safe, sure pilots of victory, in favour of the untried champions of theoretical Socialism.’¹

Dunning’s complaint is not unusual for a Conservative supporter in this period, but its emotional tone is striking. The peculiar mix of mourning, resentment and rebuke is familiar from Kit Kowol’s recent work on Conservative responses to the party’s failure at the 1945 election.² My own interest lies less in the specific emotions on display, than in the way they are used to underpin a particular (and I would say particularly Conservative) kind of truth claim. Having reflected on the vagaries of the electoral pendulum, Dunning goes on:

* I am grateful to all those who have commented on versions of this paper, from its beginnings at ‘The Philosophy of Conservatism’ workshop at the Ethics Centre, University of Zurich in 2014, to more recent incarnations at the Birmingham Modern British Studies Conference, North American Conference on British Studies, the ‘De-Centring Conservatism’ conference at the University of Oxford, and as a research-in-progress paper at the Universities of York and East Anglia, all in 2017. Kit Kowol has been a constant source of insights; Claire Langhamer and Chris Jeppesen kindly commented on drafts. Their notes and those of the two anonymous reviewers were invaluable.

¹ J. F. Dunning, letter to the *Kemp Town Post*, issue 8, April 1951, p. 3; *List of Voters Brighton and Hove*, 1951

² Kit Kowol, ‘Missing the War: Loss and Post-War Conservatism’, unpublished paper, Decentring Conservatism, St. John’s College, Oxford, 21 September 2017

It is odd how the mundane things of life can strike home in us an abrupt realisation of our changed fortunes after six years of this inept, ill-conceived, and selfish rule. In this congested area in which we live, Sunday morning has ever been redolent of the Sunday joint. We live too much cheek by jowl for anyone's cooking to go unnoticed by his neighbour.

This morning, for the first time since we came to Brighton, since the Second World War was completed gloriously and victoriously, we, in the thing at the back we call our garden could trace no smell of roasting. In none of the many kitchens which crowd us in, was the Englishman's traditional Sunday joint being cooked.

It was like the ticking of a clock – unnoticed till it stops.³

There is a great deal of note here, not least the bitterness at 'changed fortunes' which implicitly links the writer's 'congested' and 'crowd[ed]' living conditions with the Labour government. But I want to focus on the interaction between the different kinds of authority the writer draws upon. On the one hand lie 'the mundane things of life', experienced particularly through his sense of smell. On the other, something far more reverential, expressed through overt military patriotism and the invocation of a national identity so deep it could be equivalent to time itself: the perpetual tick of the clock. Yet these two ways of understanding the world – the everyday and the awesome – are woven tightly together. It is through mundane sounds and smells that the writer experiences his national identity, and through his sense of cultural inheritance that the former comes to signify more than the price of meat.

³ Dunning, letter to the *Kemp Town Post*

In this article, I want to argue that the interaction of these two ways of knowing, the everyday and the awesome, was central to Conservative thought and practice in mid-twentieth-century England. While attention to the everyday has more commonly been associated with the left, I suggest that it played a critical role in the development of a Conservative political project capable of mass appeal in the democratic age. This should not, however, be understood as an instrumental attempt to ride the political tide. Rather, it was rooted in a distinctly Conservative worldview, which privileged the certainty of experience over the abstractions of reason, while also, paradoxically, insisting on the necessity of faith in the face of the impenetrability of the human experience. This amounted to a particular form of knowledge claim, in which sensory perception seemed to reinforce eternal (though unfathomable) truths.

I trace this tension between the everyday and the awesome through the texts of Conservative philosophers, the speeches of Conservative politicians, and the publications of grassroots Conservatism in mid-twentieth-century England. Its inflections differed across levels of the party, between individuals, and across time. Yet, it is a consistent thread in discussions about the nature and prospects of Conservatism, from reports on constituency matters to prime ministerial addresses, underpinning confident claims about the party's permanence, and apocalyptic predictions of its imminent collapse. Indeed, it was the juxtaposition of deep time and daily political reality which enabled both of these positions to stand at once. Similarly, the intense Conservative anxiety over nationhood reveals a

mutually sustaining relationship between imperial power and domestic comfort, in which the everyday and the awesome continually reinforce one another.

In order to conceptualise these tensions, I have taken inspiration from Conservative authors and turned to Edmund Burke. His theory of the beautiful and the sublime enables us to think through the relationship between loveliness and terror, familiarity and mystery, everyday experience and awesome authority, without diminishing the first half of each pairing.⁴ However, the 'dilemma of the sublime' is that it is always at risk of collapsing into the familiar.⁵ In post-war England, when ordinariness took on its own political authority, its relationship to the awesome became increasingly difficult to sustain.

I

In mid-twentieth-century England, the feelings and experiences of 'ordinary' people became increasingly prominent in the public realm. Claire Langhamer has shown how post-war politics both utilised and sought to manage such feelings. She argues that this contributed to an emerging 'right to feel'.⁶ Similarly Nick Clarke et al have noted the development of an 'ideology of intimacy', by which citizens' unsatisfied desire for 'authenticity' in politicians led them to turn instead to their own feelings as a form of seemingly neutral, apolitical, and –

⁴ Corey Robin makes a similar argument, but his argument focuses almost exclusively on the fear and violence of the sublime, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 44-49; 219-223

⁵ Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 46-7

⁶ Claire Langhamer, 'An archive of feeling? Mass observation and the mid-century moment', *Insights*, 9 (2016), 9

crucially – *incontrovertible* political wisdom.⁷ In both cases, the feelings and experiences of ordinary people came to seem legitimate sources of political and social knowledge, precisely because they were personal and individual, and not derived from external or communal authority.⁸

It is no coincidence that both Langhamer and Clarke et al draw heavily on Mass Observation, a project designed to infuse policy making with an understanding of ‘the politics of everyday life’.⁹ Langhamer’s work details how its attention to the feelings of ‘ordinary people’ -- particularly its practice of asking citizens how they *felt* about social and political events, rather than what they *thought* -- was inscribed into the political culture of post-war reconstruction.¹⁰ Moreover, Mass Observation was part of a broader sociological drive to seize the radical potential of the everyday and the ordinary. As Ben Highmore has made clear, theories of the everyday have usually had a radical intent. They have worked to make the familiar strange, to demystify the unfamiliar, and to provide us with the means of resisting the regimes of capitalist modernity on daily life.¹¹

The everyday might, then, seem an odd place to begin a study of Conservatism. Valorising the feelings and experiences of ordinary people is fundamentally democratising and anti-deferential. Yet, Conservatism has long valued experience over ideology and feeling over

⁷ Nick Clarke et al, *The Good Politician: Folk Theories, Political Interaction and the Rise of Anti-Politics* (Cambridge, 2018)

⁸ My thinking on this topic has been shaped by many conversations with Jonathan Moss and Jake Watts, for which I am very grateful.

⁹ Alexandre Campsie, ‘Mass-Observation, Left Intellectuals and the Politics of Everyday Life’, *The English Historical Review*, 131:548 (2016), 92-121

¹⁰ Langhamer, ‘An archive of feeling?’, 9

¹¹ Ben Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2001), chapter 6. See for instance Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, tr. Steven Rendall, (University of California Press, 1984)

reason. Its core texts stress common sense and everyday experience.¹² They emphasise, in the words of Michael Oakeshott, its 'love of the familiar', its preference for 'fact' over 'mystery' and 'the actual' to 'the possible'.¹³ But while there are superficial similarities, Conservative appeals to the everyday are the direct inverse of the theories Highmore describes. They take comfort in the familiarity of the known, regard the unknown with fear, and encourage us to accept our place within existing social hierarchies. Moreover, despite their protestations to the contrary, most Conservative writers slip from the everyday to a very different register – one that is rooted in reverence, majesty and awe. These two strands did not merely co-exist within modern Conservatism, but ran alongside and through one another.

This relationship between the banal and the transcendent has been expressed particularly clearly by G.K. Chesterton – emphatically not a Conservative himself, but appropriated by Roger Scruton for his 1991 collection of *Conservative Texts*:

Ordinary things are more valuable than extraordinary things; nay, they are more extraordinary. Man is more awful than men; something more strange. [...] The mere man on two legs, as such, should be felt as something more heartbreaking than any music and more startling than any caricature.¹⁴

¹² See, for example, Lord Hugh Cecil's *Conservatism* (1912), Keith Feiling's *What is Conservatism?* (1930), Michael Oakeshott's 'On being conservative', in Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in politics and other essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991), 407-37, Quintin Hogg's *The Case for Conservatism* (1947), and Roger Scruton's *The Meaning of Conservatism* (1980)

¹³ Oakeshott, 'On being conservative', 408

¹⁴ G.K. Chesterton *Orthodoxy* [1908], in Roger Scruton (ed.) *Conservative Texts: An Anthology* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), 59-60. Chesterton identified as Liberal, albeit one who had 'wandered away from the other Liberals': G.K. Chesterton, 'Our Note Book', *Illustrated London News*, 7 January 1928, 2. For more on his thought see Julia Stapleton, *Christianity, Patriotism and Nationhood: The England of G.K. Chesterton* (Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2009)

It is the ordinariness of human existence which Conservatism finds so extraordinary, its experiential nature that makes it so unknowable.

II

In order to conceptualise this tension between the everyday and the awesome, the mundane and the transcendent, let us turn to Edmund Burke. While Burke was not a Conservative himself, and only came to be thought of as ‘the father of modern conservatism’ a century after his death, his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) had become a constant reference in Conservative thought by the turn of the twentieth century.¹⁵ Burke’s earlier *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757, revised 1759), which is largely seen as an exercise in aesthetic theory rather than political thought, did not appear explicitly in Conservative texts. Yet, it provides a useful lens through which to read them.

Burke’s *Enquiry* was part of a large body of eighteenth-century scholarship on the sublime. His innovations were to connect the sublime to power (‘I know of nothing sublime that is not some modification of power’¹⁶), and differentiate it absolutely from the beautiful.¹⁷ The latter was a social emotion, associated with love, smallness, fragility and subordination: ‘we

¹⁵ Emily Jones, *Edmund Burke and the Invention of Modern Conservatism: 1830-1914* (Oxford University Press, 2017)

¹⁶ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. James T. Boulton (London: Routledge, (2008 [1958]), 64

¹⁷ For an overview of this history, see Philip Shaw, *The Sublime* (London: Routledge, 2006)

love what submits to us'.¹⁸ In contrast, the sublime was individual, rooted in self-preservation, 'impressed with a sense of awe, in a sort of tranquility shadowed by horror', and, crucially, it holds power over us: 'we submit to what we admire'.¹⁹ While the beautiful was located in everyday social relations, the sublime operated on an awesome, unfathomable scale.

Significantly, Burke was uneasy about the beautiful, which he saw as indolent and enervating, something which 'not only disables the members [of the body] from performing their functions, but takes away the vigorous tone of fibre which is requisite for carrying on the necessary and natural secretions.'²⁰ The intense 'labour' of the sublime was therefore necessary to counter the complacency of the beautiful.²¹ At first glance, this seems to make Burke an unlikely source of inspiration for a political creed that claims to be rooted in the simple pleasures of sociability, community and the domestic. Take, for instance, Michael Oakeshott's reflections 'On being conservative':

The man of conservative temperament believes that a known good is not lightly to be surrendered for an unknown better. He is not in love with what is dangerous and difficult; he is unadventurous; he has no impulse to sail uncharted seas; for him there is no magic in being lost, bewildered or shipwrecked. [...] What others plausibly

¹⁸ Burke, *Enquiry*, 113

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 34; 113

²⁰ *Ibid*, 133

²¹ For more on this see Shaw, *The Sublime*; Terry Eagleton, 'Aesthetics and Politics in Edmund Burke', in *History Workshop Journal* 28: 1 (1989), 53-62; Tom Furniss, *Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideology: Language, gender, and political economy in revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993)

identify as timidity, he recognizes in himself as rational prudence; what others interpret as inactivity, he recognizes as a disposition to enjoy rather than to exploit.²²

This timid, unadventurous seeker of certainty could not be further from Burke's admirer of the vast and obscure sublime. Yet, contrary to the passage above, Oakeshott also believed Conservatives to be particularly attuned to the power of 'mysteries and uncertainties'.²³ Indeed, without the sublime emotions of awe, reverence and fear, Conservatism would be little more than comfortable sociability.

III

The tension between the everyday and the awesome is present in most of the iconic texts of Conservative thought. But it comes through in different ways, sometimes explicitly and sometimes in a kind of slippage. In his 1913 *Toryism: A Political Dialogue*, for example, Keith Feiling tried to ally Conservatism with the most concrete elements of human existence. Through the voice of Edward Franklin – a character described as 'a Tory of principle', he declared 'I associate Toryism with every element of permanent value in the life of a nation -- above all, in the life of England. Every man [...] loves his home, loves the work of his hands, loves his country.' Yet, as he went on his tone became more elevated, more spiritual: 'Every man, too needs the help of his fellows, needs some agency to mediate between him and his God, needs law [...].' In the next sentence Feiling (as Franklin) drew the conclusion that 'Toryism is permanent; Liberalism, accidental. Toryism is rooted in the facts of nature in

²² Oakeshott, 'On being conservative', 412

²³ Michael Oakeshott, 'Rationalism in Politics', in *Rationalism in Politics and other essays*, revised edn (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991 [1962]), 6

Divine revelation; Liberalism is founded on assumption and human pride.²⁴ Not only do we slip seamlessly between the everyday and the awesome, the concrete and the unfathomable, but the everyday love of home, work and country is treated *as* awesome, as part of a divine order, not merely the ‘accidental’ aspects of human history.

In a 1957 speech to the Conservative Political Centre, Quintin Hogg put forward a similar argument, that in contrast to the ideologies of other parties, ‘Toryism represents something at once more modest and more durable. It is simply the family name for an actual group of people.’ The more he expanded upon the role of this group of people, the more awe-inspiring its task became: ‘The end of the Conservative Party is the conservation of that deposit of faith, that living experience which came here with Columba and Augustine fourteen centuries ago.’²⁵ It is particularly striking that he aligns ‘faith’ with ‘living experience’ – again, we see the transcendental rubbing up against the rooted.

In his 1933 history of *Conservatism in England*, the medieval historian and lecturer at the Conservative Ashridge College, F. J. C. Hearnshaw suggested that ‘The conservative reveres the past’ simply on practical grounds,

He believes that, even though each successive generation of his ancestors was in its day no more intellectually sane or morally sound than the silly and sentimental generation to which he himself belongs, nevertheless a long process of trial and

²⁴ Keith Feiling, *Toryism: A Political Dialogue* (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1913), 18-19

²⁵ The Rt. Hon. Viscount Hailsham, QC, *Toryism and Tomorrow*, 10 October 1957 speech to CPC meeting at Party Conference in Brighton, CPC pamphlet no 181 (London: Conservative Political Centre, 1957), 9-10

rejection has purified their creations from error and made them fit for their appointed work.²⁶

Yet, like Feiling and Hogg, he continued in a rather more spiritual vein:

He stands for the universal and permanent things of life; for the ancient traditions of the race; for the fundamental laws of his people; for established customs; for the family; for property; for the church; for the constitution; for the great heritage of Christian civilisation in general.²⁷

He also approvingly cited the sociologist A.B. Wolfe's observation that (in Hearnshaw's paraphrase) 'the primary conservative emotion is fear', noting that 'there are certain things that ought to make one afraid'. Among these, he counted the realisation that 'civilisation is a frail flower doubtfully struggling for existence amid a jungle of old luxuriant barbarism', and 'changes which may crack the crust of civilisation and let loose upon the world the flaming floods of banditry and barbarism.'²⁸

Hearnshaw's 'crust of civilisation' has clear resonances with the way the beautiful and the sublime operate in Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. It is because Britain's constitution is based on the 'sublime principles' of church and monarchical

²⁶ F.J.C. Hearnshaw, *Conservatism in England* (London: Macmillan, 1933), 22-2. For more on Ashridge College and its place within Conservative culture, see Clarisse Berthezène, *Training minds for the war of ideas: Ashridge College, the Conservative Party and the cultural politics of Britain, 1929–54* (Manchester University Press, 2015). NB Hearnshaw makes clear in the introduction to his book that he is not a member of the Conservative Party, but is a conservative by inclination. His teaching position at Ashridge also meant that his ideas were influential within wider Conservative circles.

²⁷ Ibid, 23

²⁸ Ibid, 17-18

authority that it can ‘operate with a wholesome awe upon free citizens’, who ‘should approach to the faults of the state as to the wounds of a father, with pious awe and trembling solicitude.’²⁹ Yet, the beautiful is necessary to soften and socialise the sublime. In one of the most famous passages of the *Reflections*, Burke regrets that ‘All the pleasing illusions, which made power gentle and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life, and which, by a bland assimilation, incorporated into politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society, are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of light and reason. All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off.’³⁰

The idea that the beautiful acts as a socially acceptable mask for the sublimity of power is arresting.³¹ It also suggests a way of reading the interaction between the everyday and the awesome in twentieth-century Conservative politics. The insistence that Conservatism is rooted in everyday experience renders its faith in eternal truths both comprehensible and palatable, while the latter prevents it dissolving into the reactive acceptance of whatever is current.

IV

These expositions of Conservative principles should be seen as part of a concerted effort on the part of the party to engage in the battle of ideas, and to counter the perceived intellectual dominance of the left. While the Conservative Party was remarkably successful

²⁹ Burke, *Reflections*, 81; 84

³⁰ *Ibid*, 67

³¹ Terry Eagleton has described this passage as ‘speak[ing] up [...] for what Gramsci will later term “hegemony”’: ‘Aesthetics and Politics’, 60

in appealing to the working-class and women voters enfranchised in 1918 and 1928, it also worried both about its own place in the democratic age, and about the precariousness of mass democracy amidst rising demagoguery and extremism.³² In particular, Socialism was seen to present 'an inconceivably grave menace to the honour, the security, the solvency, and the very existence of Great Britain and its Empire.' It was 'conservatives, upon whom the salvation of the country and its dominions ultimately depends'.³³

The work of the Right Book Club and Ashridge College (where Feiling and Hearnshaw lectured), and, later, Swinton College (where Hogg was a speaker), were all central to this effort. Yet, while recent scholarship has shown that this was a far more deliberate exercise than hitherto recognised, it has also underlined that this was a distinctive kind of intellectual project; one that set itself against the abstractions of theory by appealing to common sense and political instinct.³⁴ Rather than 'attempt[ing] to bustle the ordinary man into uncomfortable positions', the Conservative accepted that he was 'lazy, timid, and distrustful of all change'.³⁵ Similarly, the party's appeal to the new women voters sought to show them that they were *already* instinctively Conservative.³⁶

³² Philip Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin: Conservative Leadership and National Values* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)

³³ Hearnshaw, *Conservatism in England*, 5-6

³⁴ See, for instance, Berthezène, *Training minds for the war of ideas*; E.H.H. Green, *Ideologies of Conservatism* (Oxford University Press, 2002), chapter 5; Lawrence Black, 'Tories and Hunters: Swinton College and the landscapes of modern Conservatism', *History Workshop Journal* 77 (2014), 187-214; Gary Love, 'The Periodical Press and the Intellectual Culture of Conservatism in Interwar Britain', *Historical Journal* 57:4 (2014), 1027-1056

³⁵ Ralph Parker, 'Reason and Instinct in Conservative Philosophy', in A.R. Parker, R. Gresham Cooke and Felix Green (eds) *A Declaration of Tory Principles, Essays by Undergraduates of Oxford and Cambridge* (Cambridge: W Heffer & Sons, 1929), 3-11 (5)

³⁶ David Jarvis, 'Mrs Maggs and Betty: The Conservative Appeal to Women Voters in the 1920s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 5:2 (1994), 129-52

In tone this aligned with the culture of small-c 'conservative modernity', which Alison Light has outlined in popular literature between the wars.³⁷ But it also built on longer-standing attempts to depict Conservatism as uniquely attuned to the materiality of daily life, whether that was to be found in the pleasures of the working-man's pint, the pressures on the family shopping basket, or the comforts of 'hearth and home'.³⁸ Here, (as in Dunning's letter) lived experience combined with cultural inheritance as an unassailable form of social knowledge.

Perhaps the clearest example of this combination of the prosaic and the poetic is Stanley Baldwin. On one level, Baldwin was a 'constructive Conservative', comfortable with progress and attuned to the concerns of the everyday. Yet, he skilfully combined this pragmatism with a far more romantic sense of the deep instincts of the English people, which he believed to be embedded in their sensory perceptions. His famous evocation of the rural soundscape of England (the hammer, anvil, plough, scythe and the call of the corncrake), enhanced by 'the smell of wood smoke' and 'scutch fires', 'that our ancestors, tens of thousands of years ago, must have caught on the air', was followed by the declaration that 'These things strike down into the very depths of our nature, and touch chords that go back to the beginning of time and the human race, but they are chords that with every year of our life sound a deeper note in our inner-most being.'³⁹ He drew a stark and pitiful contrast between the everyday experiences and the awesome inclinations of the people:

³⁷ Alison Light, *Forever England: femininity, literature and conservatism between the wars* (London: Routledge, 1991)

³⁸ Jon Lawrence, 'Class and gender in the making of urban Toryism, 1880 1914' *English Historical Review* 108 (1993), 629-652

³⁹ Stanley Baldwin, *On England* (London: Philip Allan and Co., 1924), 7

These are the things that make England, and I grieve for it that they are not the childish inheritance of the majority of the people to-day in our country, [...] but nothing can be more touching than to see how the working man and women after generations in the towns will have their tiny bit of garden if they can, will go to gardens if they can, to look at something they have never seen as children, but which their ancestors knew and loved.⁴⁰

From here (and we must be reminded of the Dunnings with their ‘the thing at the back we call our garden’), Baldwin moved into a celebration of Empire as the realm where the innate English ‘love of home’ could be recreated in an age of industrial urban modernity, with its lack of ‘room’. And then, suddenly, from the register of gardens, countryside and everyday colonialism, we arrive at the essential continuity of the English character and civilisation over the deep time of millennia:

... just as to-day more than fifteen centuries since the last of those great Roman legionaries left England, we still speak of the Roman strength, and the Roman work, and the Roman character, so perhaps in the ten thousandth century, long after the Empires of this world as we know them have fallen and others have risen and fallen, and risen and fallen again, the men who are then on this earth may yet speak of those characteristics which we prize as the characteristics of the English, and that long after, maybe, the name of the country has passed away, wherever men are honourable and upright and persevering, lovers of home, of their brethren, of justice

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 7-8

and of humanity, the men in the world of that day may say, "We still have among us the gifts of that great English race."⁴¹

Conservatism was, then, transmitted through everyday and concrete encounters with the land, its people, its sounds, and its smells. It was responsive to environment and could be cultivated or neglected. Yet, it was also imagined as a spiritual duty, which transcended the particularities of historical time.

V

The idea that Conservatism was guardian to a deep racial inheritance, linked both to English nationhood and to Empire, runs through Conservative periodicals of the late 1920s. As does the sense that this was subject to existential threat. In 1929, an older Conservative, alarmed by her experiences of canvassing in Chelmsford, wrote to the party's magazine *Home and Politics* to warn readers of the 'burning fact' that 'old conservative families' were so complacent in their political faith that they had left themselves unable to 'pass on the old faith to our sons and daughters, but are content to let them pass into the ranks of Socialism'. She went on, 'I do not hesitate to prophesy that unless we wake up to a knowledge of our responsibilities we are casting down the pillars that support our glorious Empire.'⁴²

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 8-9

⁴² Mrs F. M. Willis, 'Responsibilities of Conservative Parents', letter to *Home and Politics*, No. 101, October 1929, 20

In both the inter- and post-war periods, Conservative parents and teachers worried how to equip children to deal with the 'acutely uncomfortable doubts and questionings' which an 'indoctrinated Socialist child' may be able to rouse.⁴³ Once again we find the tension between Conservatism as intuitive and as requiring active promotion. The Young Britons movement was founded explicitly in order to counter perceived communist influence on younger children in the interwar years. It had an elevated sense of patriotic duty, likened in one article to the Knights of the Round Table. Again, this was grounded in everyday sensory experience: the sight of the countryside, the feel of a cricket bat, the sound of sea shanties were imagined to offer such intense love of country that they would entirely inoculate children against 'the disease of Bolshevism'.⁴⁴ James Dunning would no doubt have added the smell of the Sunday joint to that list.

In all of these examples, the senses are seen to provide a direct route to an embodied, inherited *knowledge*, which could transcend political argument. This comes out particularly clearly in a letter from a parent to the *Right Angle: the Journal of the Conservative and Unionist Teachers' Association* in 1950:

If we are to preserve the British tradition and way of life it is absolutely essential that faith shall be kept alive. It is nothing short of cruelty to bring up our children without faith in the name of freedom from bias.

⁴³ A Parent, 'Supple Young Minds' letter to *The Right Angle*, 2:3, Summer 1950, 6-7

⁴⁴ A Schoolmaster, 'Child Communists in Schools', *Home and Politics*, October 1927 [Accessed as part of *Uxbridge Division Review*: 1:1], 16-17 (17). For more on the Young Britons, see Lawrence Black, 'The Lost World of Young Conservatism', *The Historical Journal*, 51: 4 (2008), 991-1024

Faith is quite another thing from doctrine. Faith in such historical things as religion or the Empire requires a certain knowledge of the past. To look at the achievements of past generations in fair perspective does not demand unquestioning and fanatical allegiance to their ideas. What it does is to make us aware of the eternal spiritual values.

[...] That knowledge is the fount of faith, and that is the knowledge which our children need to protect them from the undermining cynicism of Marx.

Faith here is positioned against 'freedom from bias', 'doctrine', and 'cynicism', a matter of instinct, transmitting 'the British tradition and way of life'. It is, then, a defence of inherited faith over rationality. Yet, it is the concreteness of *knowledge* that is seen to provide the basis of that faith. The second paragraph slips from concrete 'historical things' to 'eternal spiritual values' in a way that recalls the Conservative political texts we examined above.

VI

Far from operating solely in the realm of the concrete and the familiar, then, one of most striking aspects of Conservatism is its predilection for the obscure and the unfathomable. As Ralph Parker, a contributor to a 1923 collection of *Essays by Undergraduates of Oxford and Cambridge*, put it, 'The claim of Conservatism is that it is resigned to the mysteries and muddles of human nature, and that it recognises that most of the light and shade of light depends upon them.'⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Parker, 'Reason and Instinct', 7

This is an idea that recurs in Conservative thought throughout the twentieth century. As we have seen, while Michael Oakeshott celebrated Conservatives' 'love of the familiar', and preference for 'fact' over 'mystery', he also praised their 'power of accepting mysteries and uncertainties of experience without any irritable search for order and distinctness' – a tendency which he aligned with Keats' idea of 'negative capability'.⁴⁶ In 1978, Shirley Robin Letwin made a similar point about what she called 'metaphysical scepticism', noting that the Conservative 'takes all human thought to be surrounded by mystery, which he may probe but can never dispel'.⁴⁷ Where social democrats turned to psychology as a way of understanding and cultivating the human mind,⁴⁸ Conservatives revelled in its impenetrability.

On one level, this is an anti-utilitarian position. It is about accepting the messiness of human existence and demonstrating the limits of politics. Yet, the language of mystery and metaphysics suggests that it goes deeper than that. Letwin navigates an open space between religious faith, which metaphysical sceptics view as 'a gift', and scientific truth, which should 'be understood as one of the various ways of ordering experience, all of them rational, poetry and history no less so than science, and each with its own distinctive

⁴⁶ Oakeshott, 'Rationalism in Politics', 6

⁴⁷ Shirley Robin Letwin, 'On Conservative Individualism', in Maurice Cowling, ed., *Conservative Essays* (London: Cassell, 1978), 52-68 (60)

⁴⁸ Stephen Brooke, 'Evan Durbin: Reassessing a Labour "Revisionist"', *Twentieth Century British History* 7:1 (1996), 27-52 (38-42); Jeremy Nuttall, *Psychological Socialism: The Labour Party and qualities of mind and character, 1931 to the present* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006); Rhodri Hayward, 'The Pursuit of Serenity: Psychological Knowledge and the Making of the Welfare State', in Sally Alexander and Barbara Taylor (eds), *History and Psyche: Culture, Psychoanalysis and the Past* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012), 283-304

purpose, procedures and truth.⁴⁹ This is a claim to a particular way of *knowing*, which is presented as peculiarly in alignment with the human condition. In Parker's words:

By an easily intelligible paradox, the Conservative philosophy is more intellectual than pure intellect, and more rational than pure reason. The intellectual case for Conservatism [...] is more than arguable: it is unanswerable. For Conservatism is, in the highest sense of that misleading phrase, an attitude of *mind*.⁵⁰

The conception of Conservatism as *unanswerable* is striking. As the parent whose letter to the *Right Angle* we examined above made clear, it is formed of a distinct relationship between experience and faith, custom and power.

These themes come through particularly strongly in the religious writings of Enoch Powell. In a sermon published in 1977, Powell reflected on the nature of faith, which for him was an awesome and authoritative experience:

[...] faith is not believing what cannot be proved *because* it is unprovable. Faith is believing something which, though not provable, so takes possession of us that it is impossible afterwards to imagine living without it. It has the force of inevitability.⁵¹

But although faith, for Powell went *beyond* reason, it was still profoundly cognitive. Indeed, he stressed the extent to which Christianity was an 'intellectual religion', which 'makes

⁴⁹ Letwin, 'On Conservative Individualism', 60-61

⁵⁰ Parker, 'Reason and Instinct', 11. Original emphasis

⁵¹ Enoch Powell, 'I Believe' in Powell, *Wrestling with the Angel* (London: Sheldon Press, 1977), 83-6 (86)

demands on peoples [sic] minds'.⁵² Faith for Powell was a matter of ongoing – and fundamentally irresolvable – struggle.⁵³

Powell strongly objected to the Church of England's attempts to reduce Christianity to the level of the everyday, the ordinary, the concrete. In place of 'cosy' social activity he emphasized its dependence on the miraculous.⁵⁴ This could be read as instrumentally political; he was resisting the party political overtones of the 'social gospel'.⁵⁵ But there was far more at stake. For Powell, this was a question of the very nature of the sacred, which could only be approached as 'an unfathomed mystery'.⁵⁶ This involved the 'continuing repetition' of the miraculous crossing of the 'gulf between the natural and the supernatural, between the absolute and the human, between the inconceivable of the incarnation and the resurrection and the conceivable'.⁵⁷ To return to Letwin: the Conservative 'takes all human thought to be surrounded by mystery, which he may probe but can never dispel'.⁵⁸

Powell's thoughts on nationhood and allegiance also transcended physical reality. He described his sense (before 1946) that England and Wales were 'always somehow in a fourth dimension, the dimension of time, as if they were the stage and scenery of the long epic of the English kings.' This underpinned 'the assumption, present without being reasoned, that all other aims and values were subordinate to preserving the empire-nation

⁵² Enoch Powell, 'The Heart of the Matter "Quicunque Vult"', 7 November 1965. Quoted in Camilla Schofield, *Enoch Powell and the Making of Postcolonial Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 260-1

⁵³ See especially Enoch Powell, 'Bibliolatry', in Powell, *Wrestling with the Angel*, 87-94 (93)

⁵⁴ Enoch Powell, 'The Woman Taken in Adultery' in *ibid*, 99-103 (100). See also 'Christianity and Social Activity', pp. 30-41 and 'The Feeding of the Five Thousand', pp. 95-98

⁵⁵ For more on the politicization of the Church of England, see Eliza Filby, *God and Mrs Thatcher: The Battle for Britain's Soul* (London: BiteBack Publishing, 2015)

⁵⁶ Enoch Powell, 'The God Who Hides Himself' in Powell, *Wrestling with the Angel*, 104-107 (105)

⁵⁷ Enoch Powell, 'Christianity and Social Activity', in *ibid*, 30-41 (48)

⁵⁸ Shirley Robin Letwin, 'On Conservative Individualism', 60

[...] personalized and rationalized in terms of allegiance.’⁵⁹ It was as a collapse of this affective state of imperial subjecthood that Powell understood the end of Empire.⁶⁰ He noted the shrinking of horizons: from the vastness and obscurity of Empire to the familiarity and beauty of the nation state: ‘it was for me as if the nation and the monarchy had come back home again.’⁶¹

VII

The post-war reckoning with decolonisation threw the connection between the everyday and the awesome into particular relief. Kit Kowol’s recent work has explored the idea that the ‘trauma’ experienced by Conservatives at all levels of the party in 1945 was about more than the immediate loss of political power. It was entwined with the collapse of an imagined imperial future. The war had, on this understanding (which was not limited to Conservatives⁶²), been fought by and for the Empire and, moreover, had succeeded in bringing its nations closer together. The supposed abandonment of this agenda after the war was, then, experienced as a betrayal of this sacrifice and as a forced dissolution of the bonds of allegiance.⁶³ As we saw above, for some Conservatives, Empire still seemed an unproblematic and uncontested source of shared national identity into the 1950s. For others, like Enoch Powell, it suggested the need to relinquish former preoccupations and turn inwards, to a renewed sense of cultural inheritance and sacred allegiance.

⁵⁹ Enoch Powell, ‘Patriotism’, in Powell, *Wrestling with the Angel*, 1-8 (2-3)

⁶⁰ See Schofield, *Enoch Powell*

⁶¹ Powell, ‘Patriotism’, 3

⁶² See, for instance, Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell. I am grateful to Chris Jeppesen for this observation

⁶³ Kit Kowol, ‘The Conservative Movement and Dreams of Britain’s Post-War Future’, *Historical Journal* 62:2 (2019), pp. 473-493

This might, then, be understood as a turn from the sublimity of the imperial, to the beauty of the domestic. Yet, in Powell's text Englishness is not rendered as safe, familiar, beautiful but rather as an encounter with the unfathomable majesty of the sublime. Inversely, it must be remembered that, for many Conservatives, the Empire was itself an intensely familiar, domestic space. Chris Jeppesen and Sarah Longair's recent work on material memories of Empire unpicks the way in which personal, professional and wider cultural memories become embedded within physical objects (most notably, elephants' feet), kept within domestic spaces. As one of their interviewees, born and brought up in Kenya, before serving as a District Officer in Tanganyika, emphasised, 'these objects had not been brought "home"; rather home had been left behind'.⁶⁴ As Jeppesen explains:

The habituation of these items in homes thus serves to domesticate and normalise the structures of power that, in [Elizabeth] Edwards' formulation, 'made colonial relations both thinkable and knowable in the first place'. It is the paradox of their now everyday banality entangled with the way in which they function as material testimony to the exceptionality of lives lived in empire, which can make objects such potent tools in remembering.⁶⁵

The intermingling of the domestic and the imperial was not limited to former colonial officers. As Deborah Sugg-Ryan has noted, interwar suburban interiors were stuffed with

⁶⁴ Chris Jeppesen, 'The elephant not in the room: nostalgia, absence and the memory of empire', unpublished paper

⁶⁵ Ibid, citing Elizabeth Edwards, 'The colonial archival imaginaire at home', *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale*, 24:1 (2016), 52–66 (62)

the ‘detritus of Empire’ – the ‘everyday exotic’ of (often British made and mass-produced) ebony elephants, oriental vases and Benares brasswork.⁶⁶ This domestication of Empire, its enmeshment within the everyday spaces of (white) home and family, could be understood as a way of – in Burke’s formulation – ‘beautify[ing] and soften[ing]’ it. But it also placed the domestic space within a vast and exoticised network of power relations. The tension between the two elements is essential. The (sublime) terror of imperialism was refracted through the homeliness of everyday colonialism, while the (beautiful) domestic was made less parochial by the awesome backdrop of Empire.⁶⁷

Well into the 1950s, as Jeppesen has shown, the Colonial Service’s recruitment materials ‘aimed to engender a romantic fascination with the colonies through the promise of adventure and the wonder of the African landscape.’⁶⁸ This was explicitly contrasted with the domestic ‘tedium of “tending a suburban garden and playing golf.”’⁶⁹ One recruit looked back with a ‘shiver’ on his ‘total but enchanted ignorance’, and described his decision to join in tones which could not be more orientalist: ‘The magic casement opened to an entrancing vision of palm trees and elephants and I said “yes” without another thought’.⁷⁰ Such discourse imagines Africa as not only unknown but *unknowable*. It is no accident that when recruitment slowed in the 1950s, the Colonial Service began to target university mountaineering societies: this was, after all, the foundation of Romantic European notions

⁶⁶ Deborah Sugg-Ryan, *Ideal Homes, 1918-39: Domestic Design and Suburban Modernism* (Manchester University Press, 2018), 163

⁶⁷ For more on the distinction between imperial and colonial experiences of Empire, see Patrician M. E. Lorcin, ‘The Nostalgias for Empire’, *History and Theory* 57:2 (2018), 269-285

⁶⁸ Chris Jeppesen, ‘“Sanders of the River, still the best job for a British boy”: Recruitment to the Colonial Administrative Service at the End of Empire’, *Historical Journal* 59:2 (2016), 469-508 (490)

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 470. Yet, as one of the anonymous reviewers of the present article pointed out, it could be argued that golf itself is sublime, in the way it pits a fallible human and a tiny (white) ball against a dramatic and vast terrain.

⁷⁰ Quoted in *ibid*, 494-5

of the sublime.⁷¹ Again, though, this was experienced in and through the beautiful. As Jeppesen underlines, imperial service ‘offered a form of sanitized nonconformity’, anchored by the continuity of identity within a tightly classed and racialized social group.⁷²

Daniel I. O’Neill has recently made the provocative claim not only that Burke’s thought should be understood as both intrinsically Conservative and Imperial, but also that it laid the foundations for later Conservative theories of Empire. For O’Neill, the distinctive feature of such ideas is the way they combine both orientalism and ornamentalism.⁷³ This is a suggestive theory, which there is not space to engage fully with here. But, in the place of these twentieth-century theories, I would suggest that Burke’s own concepts of the sublime and the beautiful do this work themselves.

VIII

What of the other half of this equation: the depiction of England? Again, we see an uneasy tension between the everyday and the awesome, the comfortable and the terrifying. On the one hand, the Conservative Party portrayed itself as the embodiment of national unity, which it imagined in cosily domestic terms as a ‘great “family spirit”’.⁷⁴ In a particularly striking example, the President of one Conservative Association wished his members Happy Christmas with the observation that as ‘families gather round their fireplaces, old feuds forgotten, old friendships renewed, and celebrate together this greatest of all Christian

⁷¹ See Robert Macfarlane, *Mountains of the Mind: A History of a Fascination* (London: Granta Books, 2003)

⁷² Jeppesen, ““Sanders of the River””, 507

⁷³ Daniel I. O’Neill, *Edmund Burke and the Conservative Logic of Empire* (University of California Press, 2016)

⁷⁴ Editorial, *Onward* April/May 1955, p. 1

feasts', it was 'with some pride that we of the Conservative creed can claim that for us the spirit of unity is steadfast and unchanging. It has no special time — no appointed place on the calendar. It is the foundation of our existence as a Party.'⁷⁵ Conservatism, by this reckoning, embodied the spirit of Christmas all year round!

On the other hand, however, Conservatives issued 'Urgent call[s]' for 'ordinary people' to engage with 'whole-hearted unity and fighting spirit in the Battle of Britain that is now being fought.'⁷⁶ We have seen that James Dunning complained to his local Conservative Association newspaper about the betrayal of the 'glorious[...] and victorious[...] legacy of the war. The same newspaper went much further in its editorials, describing the Labour government as 'an even mightier aggressor' than Nazi Germany, and nationalisation as a threat to British freedom in the tradition of the Spanish Armada, Napoleon's army, and the Luftwaffe.'⁷⁷ Even when the Conservatives returned to government, metaphorical calls to take up arms remained common, as in the inaugural edition of the *Gainsborough Gauntlet* which opened with the words: 'though we have a Conservative Government we are not on the defensive: we have to attack, attack all the time. We throw down the gauntlet as did Knights of old. Attack, attack, and attack again.'⁷⁸ Even the most mundane elements of party administration were drawn into the fight. In late 1953 and early 1954 a subscription reminder printed in several Conservative Associations' magazines showed an oversized muscled forearm punching a small face labelled 'socialism', with the message, "The more

⁷⁵ W.G. Tong, 'From the President', *Vanguard* 1:4, Winter 1953, p. 2

⁷⁶ H. T. Symons, 'What are Liberty and Freedom worth to you?' *News & Views*, Brighton Pavilion Conservative Association, June 1951, 3

⁷⁷ Editorial, *Kemp Town Post*, No 1 Sept 1950, p. 2; Editorial, 'Freedom', *Kemp Town Post*, No 2 October 1950, p. 2

⁷⁸ 'Captain Crookshank discusses first year in office', *Gainsborough Gauntlet* 1:1, January 1953, pp. 1; 8 (1)

“subs” we get the harder we can hit’.⁷⁹

At the intimate level of the home, existential threat and domestic comfort were similarly intermingled, as can be seen in Kowol’s reflections on the art in his Conservative grandmother’s home. While the art itself evoked themes of upper-class rural life, property, heredity and war, above all Kowol notes that ‘the very absences of space between the pictures as much as the pictures themselves was a constant reminder of the material and financial loss that [his] grandmother believed she had suffered.’ He notes the lack of images of either working class or imperial subjects (notwithstanding the many souvenirs of Empire, including a tiger skin rug in the attic). These absences – of space, and of particular types of images – communicated to Kowol, a sense of both privation and injustice:

Everywhere one turned in my grandmother’s house one is confronted with this. With pictures that reflect and articulate a belief that she and others of her class and generation had lost much during the war – whether that was in terms of lost opportunity, personal property, or having had to go through the traumatic experience of fighting. Moreover, even after the war they had continued to make sacrifices in order to maintain for their children a set of experiences and status they believed were due to them. By contrast, the working-class man and imperial subject, absent from her collection like the space she once had to hang her paintings, were never seen to share in the same privations. My grandmother’s Conservatism was one which sought therefore not class war, but class justice.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ For example, *Vanguard* 1:2, March Quarter 1954, p. 32

⁸⁰ Kit Kowol, ‘Art, Class, and Postwar Conservatism’, unpublished paper, presented at: ‘Reading Images’, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, 8 June 2016

This chimes with the intense discomfort with which James Dunning described his home. His letter, ostensibly about the absence of one particular domestic scent, is also an evocative portrait of cramped conditions and reduced circumstances. We do not know where the Dunnings lived before they moved to Brighton in the late 1940s, nor their social background, though it seems unlikely that they were mourning the loss of the family seat in Ireland, and probable that they were renting the flat in Brighton.⁸¹ We do know that Conservative Party membership was predominantly lower-middle-class, made up of shopkeepers, clerks and white collar professionals.⁸² So while upper-class Conservatives, like Kowol's grandmother, may have felt they had sacrificed the most, this sense of deep loss and grievance was clearly shared far beyond their immediate social circle.

It is significant that housing was the part of the post-war settlement which Conservatives made most their own. Post-war affluence mingled with Conservative ideas of property owning and family values in a heady emotional mix.⁸³ Throughout the Macmillan government, accounts of individual families who had been helped to establish a happy and

⁸¹ A marriage is recorded between a James F. Dunning and Edith Irwin or Pallant in December 1939 in Kensington. The 1911 census shows a one-year-old James Dunning (no middle initial) living in Kensington, the youngest of six children living with Elizabeth and Benjamin Walter Dunning – a laundress and a coal carman (searches via Ancestry.com). Between 1948 and 1954, James and Edith Dunning lived at 15, St James Avenue (*Kelly's Directory of Brighton and Hove*, 1947; 1948; 1954; 1956), a late Victorian redbrick terrace, with white plaster mouldings and large sash windows. Its four stories each constituted an individual flat and the Dunnings seem to have occupied either the ground- or lower-ground floor, with access to, and perhaps sole use of, the garden. It was just off a busy shopping street, a block and a half from the sea, and a short walk to Brighton Pier.

⁸² Stuart Ball, *Portrait of a Party: The Conservative Party in Britain, 1918-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 162-163. It is also worth noting that these categories of employment were significantly higher in Brighton than elsewhere, see Ben Jones, *The Working Class in Mid-Twentieth-Century England: community, identity and social memory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 46-47

⁸³ See, for instance, 'Sally', 'Open Letter to a Sister', *Forward* 1:2, Aug 1953, 22; Conservative Party Archive, posters collection, Bodleian Library, Oxford

secure home life were reprinted across the constituency magazines.⁸⁴ Yet, this was about more than individual prosperity and quality of life. Buying and furnishing homes was also seen to demonstrate a commitment to the ‘sound, worthwhile and solid things of life’, in contrast to the ‘phoney art’, “‘smart Alec” tactics’ and ‘circus[es]’ supposedly ‘foisted on the public’ by the Festival of Britain.⁸⁵ We have seen that James Dunning expressed his and Edith’s hopes for post-war life in terms of piety. Similarly, Macmillan claimed that the principal reason why the Government was concentrating on housing was religious – ‘The home and the family are the foundation of Christian society’.⁸⁶ It was through the everyday comfort of domestic life that the awesome bonds of faith and nation could be sustained.

IX

In the post-war years, then, Conservative language resonated with the emotions of everyday life, but in ways that reinforced a sense of inherited community values and allegiance to a national identity, not a personal ‘right to feel’. Yet, this was also a period in which ‘ordinariness’ took on new social and political weight. It was understood to convey personal authenticity and political authority in ways that had not previously been true. More than this, it became a legitimate way of *knowing*.⁸⁷ For Conservatives this presented both opportunities and dangers.

On the positive side, the long-stated Conservative preference for feeling over reason, and

⁸⁴ ‘Mr Macmillan’s four in one’, *Gainsborough Gauntlet* 1:2, February 1953, 3; ‘A building licence has been obtained: Mr. Macmillan’s four in one’, *The Conservative News, official journal of the Bexley Conservative Association*, no. 3, February 1953, 3. 2

⁸⁵ The Scribe, ‘The End of the Circus’, *Conservative Clubs Magazine* IV:9, Sept 1953, 5; 11

⁸⁶ Rt Hon Harold Macmillan MP, ‘Homes Mean Happiness’, *Conservative Quarterly News: Wokingham Division Conservative Association*, 1:1 spring 1953, 5; 9 (5)

⁸⁷ Claire Langhamer, ‘Who the Hell are Ordinary People?’ Ordinarity as a Category of Historical Analysis’ *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 28 (2018), 175-195

common sense over ideology now came into its own. As Claire Langhamer has pointed out, the party's 1947 'Trust the People' exhibition capitalised on this theme, offering visitors the immersive experience of an 'ordinary man-in-the-street' being harassed down the telephone by 'the voice of Authority' and 'Bureaucracy'.⁸⁸ The sensory nature of this exhibit is another example of the way in which individual sensation was counterposed to disembodied rationality. This built on interwar attempts to appeal to the newly-enfranchised electorate by presenting Conservatism as both ordinary and experiential. In 1927, the Scottish Unionist politician, Walter Elliot, had described the party divide in terms of an opposition between empirical observation, based on 'the beliefs of a great mass of people held for hundreds of years', and theoretical reason, as practiced by an elite minority.⁸⁹ And, in line with Langhamer's argument, Elliot saw the former as itself a form of expertise. Indeed, he suggested, the observational attitude of Conservatism was in the ascendant, aligned 'square with the immense and growing mass of scientific observation all over the world', most notably evolutionary biology and empirical sociology.⁹⁰

While the people here were understood as a 'great mass', that very empirical sociology meant it was a mass that was becoming ever-more individuated. And while 'ordinariness' may have been a useful statement of communality, it was one that was asserted by increasingly confident individuals. This was both levelling and empowering, in ways that ran counter to Conservative notions of natural hierarchy and deference.⁹¹ Although 'ordinariness' was (and is) often still used as a proxy for social conservatism, it was also 'a

⁸⁸ Ibid, 190

⁸⁹ Walter Elliot, *Toryism and the Twentieth Century* (London: Philip Allan & Co., 1927), 1-4

⁹⁰ Ibid, 6

⁹¹ For more on this shift, see Jon Lawrence, 'Paternalism, Class, and the British Path to Modernity,' in Simon Gunn and James Vernon (eds), *The Peculiarities of Liberal Modernity in Imperial Britain* (University of California Press, 2011), 147-164

powerful position from which to resist and to challenge authority, to assert rights and to make demands.⁹² Moreover, if ordinary experience was becoming a ubiquitous form of political knowledge, that meant Conservatives could no longer claim privileged access to this realm. It is significant that in the post-war years 'ordinary' gained working-class connotations that punctured the Conservative portrayal of Labour as 'radical', 'unordinary', and thus outside the bounds of acceptable politics.⁹³

Even more dangerous for Conservatives, however, was the de-enchantment of this discourse. As we have seen throughout this article, Conservative claims to ordinariness, and to common sense lived experience, were underpinned by far grander conceptions of nation, faith, hierarchy and power. But the fear that these were dissolving was seeping through the party. In 1954 – three years into a Conservative government – the Chairman of the Young Conservative and Unionist National Advisory Committee urged fellow Young Conservatives to get involved with committee work. Yet, his fairly mundane call for 'more teamwork, more action', 'more work, less waffle' was framed around the threat posed to 'our whole way of life' by 'bureaucratic mediocrity'. The culprit was socialism and its 'power of inoculating the disease of "averageness" into the human mind' by removing the need for individual striving.⁹⁴ It was possible to combine the politics of individual freedom with a strong sense of hierarchical authority, as the example of Enoch Powell shows, but this required constant

⁹² Langhamer, 'Who the Hell are Ordinary People?', 189

⁹³ Ibid, 179-80. Though also see Jon Lawrence and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, 'Margaret Thatcher and the decline of Class Politics', in Ben Jackson and Robert Saunders (eds), *Making Thatcher's Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 132-147, for evidence of how Thatcher used 'ordinary' as a way of neutralizing class politics.

⁹⁴ Peter Bailey, 'Work, not Waffle', *Vanguard Quarterly*, Eton and Slough Conservative Association 1:2, March Quarter 1954, 15-17 (15)

vigilance.⁹⁵ Without the intense labour of the sublime, the beauty of ordinariness would collapse into complacent mediocrity.

X

In his 1912 book, *Conservatism*, Lord Cecil distinguished between three things: ‘natural conservatism and the love of the familiar which are inherent in the minds of all men’; ‘Toryism, or the defence of Church and King’, with its ‘reverence for religion and authority’; and ‘imperialism’, ‘a feeling for the greatness of the country and for that unity which makes its greatness’. Crucially, he saw political Conservatism as an amalgam of all three.⁹⁶ In this article I have tried to argue that the second and third of these cast a particular light over the first. For Conservatives, ‘love of the familiar’ is saturated with ideas of deference and allegiance to the imperial nation and the symbols of its power in ways that are not shared with ‘all men’ [sic].

Nearly seventy years after Cecil’s book was published, the Conservative philosopher, Roger Scruton, suggested that the idea that Conservatism was based upon conservation and ‘familiarity’ was ‘limp’. Like Cecil, Scruton balanced the comfort and safety of the familiar with a strong sense of authority: ‘conservatism arises directly from the sense that one belongs to some continuing, and pre-existing social order, and that this fact is all-important in determining what to do.’⁹⁷ This is what distinguishes Conservative understandings of the

⁹⁵ For more on Powell and neoliberalism see Ben Jackson, ‘Currents of Neoliberalism: British Political Ideologies and the New Right, c.1955-1979’, *English Historical Review* CXXXI: 551, 823-850. On neoliberalism’s eventual undoing of Conservatism, see Lawrence, ‘Paternalism’

⁹⁶ Cecil, *Conservatism*, 244

⁹⁷ Roger Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism*, 3rd ed (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001 [1980]), 10

political legitimacy of everyday feeling from newer forms of anti-deferential, 'popular individualism'.⁹⁸ In place of what he called the 'cult of "authenticity"', rooted in individual self-fashioning and fulfillment, Scruton put forward the Burkean notion of culture as an inherited and social concept, and one that was backed up by a strong sense of reverence for the nation: 'custom, tradition and common culture [are] ruling conceptions in politics. If these provide ordinary citizens with a sense of the value of their acts, then self-identity and allegiance to public forms are ultimately one and the same.'⁹⁹ But it was a mindset he knew was slipping away. In the words of James Dunning, 'It was like the ticking of a clock – unnoticed till it stops'.¹⁰⁰

Dunning did not miss the smell of the Sunday roast simply because it was comforting and familiar, but because it transmitted an entire system of national authority and cultural inheritance, which he had believed not only safe, but 'gloriously and victoriously' defended. Seven months earlier his MP had called upon Conservative readers of the *Kemp Town Post* to 'inspire, with our Conservative faith, the people of this Country so that they will face the future with steady courage and with a burning knowledge that life, without freedom to worship God, and to enjoy liberty of action and freedom of speech, is a living death.'¹⁰¹ The

⁹⁸ For more on deference see Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, *Class, Politics and the Decline of Deference in England, 1968-2000* (Oxford University Press, 2018). And on the emergence of 'popular individualism' see Emily Robinson, Camilla Schofield, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Natalie Thomlinson, 'Telling Stories about Post-war Britain: Popular Individualism and the 'Crisis' of the 1970s', *20th Century British History*, 28:2, (2017), 268-304

⁹⁹ Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism*, 28

¹⁰⁰ Dunning, letter to the *Kemp Town Post*. For a suggestive argument that the everyday can only be glimpsed in retrospect, see William H. Galperin, *The History of Missed Opportunities: British Romanticism and the Emergence of the Everyday* (Stanford University Press, 2017)

¹⁰¹ Howard Johnson MP, 'Month in Westminster', *Kemp Town Post*, No 1 September 1950, 2. It is also worth noting that Johnson had a non-conventional relationship with the Conservative Party, largely on the grounds of his opposition to blood sports. He briefly left the party to stand as a Liberal, and also became a Labour supporter later in life.

conjoining of courage, faith, and *burning knowledge*, along with the threat of *living death*, lent what might otherwise have been an individualist call to 'liberty of action and freedom of speech' a sense of sublime responsibility. But it is because this faith was experienced through the mundane smells and sounds of everyday life, rather than zealous pronouncements, that it was able to seem a matter of custom, conviviality and common sense, rather than state power and authority. While fear remained central to Conservative rhetoric, it had lost its appearance of gentleness.

I have tried to show that mid-twentieth-century English Conservatism was balanced on the unacknowledged tension between these two elements: the beautiful and the sublime, the familiarity of the everyday and the solitary encounter with the unfathomable. Indeed, each could only truly be understood through the other. This relationship grew ever harder to sustain in the emotional culture of post-war England, when feeling became a marker of personal authenticity, rather than cultural authority, and political legitimacy depended upon individual autonomy, not deferential allegiance.